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## MR. HENRY JAMES'S LATER WORK.

BY WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

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It has been Mr. James's lot from the beginning to be matter of unusually lively dispute among his readers. There are people who frankly say they cannot bear him, and then either honestly let him alone, or secretly hanker for him, and every now and then return to him, and try if they cannot like him, or cannot bear him a little better. These are his enemies, or may be called so for convenience's sake; but they are hardly to be considered his readers. Many of his readers, however, are also his enemies: they read him in a condition of hot insurrection against all that he says and is; they fiercely question his point of view, they object to the world that he sees from it; they declare that there is no such world, or that, if there is, there ought not to be, and that he does not paint it truly. They would like to have the question out with him personally: such is their difference of opinion that, to hear them talk, you would think they would like to have it out with **him pugilistically**. They would, to every appearance, like to beat also those who accept his point of view, believe in his world, and hold that he truly portrays it. Nothing but the prevailing sex of his enemies saves them, probably, from offering the readers who are not his enemies the violence to which their prevailing sex tempts them. You cannot, at least, palliate his demerits with them without becoming of the quality of his demerits, and identifying yourself with him in the whole measure of these. That is why, for one reason, I am going to make my consideration of his later work almost entirely a study of his merits, for I own that he has his faults, and I would rather they remained his faults than became mine.

### I.

The enmity to Mr. James's fiction among his readers is mostly feminine because the men who do not like him are not his readers.

The men who do like him and are his readers are of a more feminine fineness, probably, in their perceptions and intuitions, than those other men who do not read him, though of quite as unquestionable a manliness, I hope. I should like to distinguish a little farther, and say that they are the sort of men whose opinions women peculiarly respect, and in whom they are interested quite as much as they are vexed to find them differing so absolutely from themselves.

The feminine enmity to Mr. James is of as old a date as his discovery of the Daisy Miller type of American girl, which gave continental offence among her sisters. It would be hard to say why that type gave such continental offence, unless it was because it was held not honestly to have set down the traits which no one could but most potently and powerfully allow to be true. The strange thing was that these traits were the charming and honorable distinctions of American girlhood as it convinced Europe, in the early eighteen-seventies, of a civilization so spiritual that its innocent daughters could be not only without the knowledge but without the fear of evil. I am not going back, however, to that early feminine grievance, except to note that it seems to have been the first tangible grievance, though it was not the first grievance. I, with my gray hairs, can remember still earlier work of his whose repugnant fascination was such that women readers clung to it with the wild rejection which has in a measure followed all his work at their hands.

It has been the curious fortune of this novelist, so supremely gifted in divining women and portraying them, that beyond any other great novelist (or little, for that matter) he has imagined few heroines acceptable to women. Even those martyr-women who have stood by him in the long course of his transgressions, and maintained through thick and thin, that he is by all odds the novelist whom they could best trust with the cause of woman in fiction, have liked his anti-heroines more,—I mean, found them realer,—than his heroines. I am not sure but I have liked them more myself, but that is because I always find larger play for my sympathies in the character which needs the reader's help than in that which is so perfect as to get on without it. If it were urged that women do not care for his heroines because there are none of them to care for, I should not blame them, still less should I blame him for giving them that ground for abhorrence. I find

myself diffident of heroines in fiction because I have never known one in life, of the real faultless kind; and heaven forbid I should ever yet know one. In Mr. James's novels I always feel safe from that sort, and it may be for this reason, among others, that I like to read his novels when they are new, and read them over and over again when they are old, or when they are no longer recent.

## II.

At this point I hear from far within a voice bringing me to book about Milly Theale in *The Wings of a Dove*, asking me, if *there* is not a heroine of the ideal make, and demanding what fault there is in her that renders her lovable. Lovable, I allow she is, dearly, tenderly, reverently lovable, but she has enough to make her so, besides being too good, too pure, too generous, too magnificently unselfish. It is not imaginable that her author should have been conscious of offering in her anything like an atonement to the offended divinity of American womanhood for Daisy Miller. But if it were imaginable the offended divinity ought to be sumptuously appeased, appeased to tears of grateful pardon such as I have not yet seen in its eyes. Milly Theale is as entirely American in the qualities which you can and cannot touch as Daisy Miller herself; and (I find myself urged to the risk of noting it) she is largely American in the same things. There is the same self-regardlessness, the same beauteous insubordination, the same mortal solution of the problem. Of course, it is all in another region, and the social levels are immensely parted. Yet Milly Theale is the superior of Daisy Miller less in her nature than in her conditions.

There is, in both, the same sublime unconsciousness of the material environment, the same sovereign indifference to the fiscal means of their emancipation to a more than masculine independence. The sense of what money can do for an American girl without her knowing it, is a "blind sense" in the character of Daisy, but in the character of Milly it has its eyes wide open. In that wonderful way of Mr. James's by which he imparts a fact without stating it, approaching it again and again, without actually coming in contact with it, we are made aware of the vast background of wealth from which Milly is projected upon our acquaintance. She is shown in a kind of breathless impatience with it, except as it is the stuff of doing wilfully magnifi-

cent things, and committing colossal expenses without more anxiety than a prince might feel with the revenues of a kingdom behind him. The ideal American rich girl has never really been done before, and it is safe to say that she will never again be done with such exquisite appreciation. She is not of the new rich; an extinct New York ancestry darkles in the retrospect: something vaguely bourgeois, and yet with presences and with lineaments of aristocratic distinction. They have made her masses of money for her, those intangible fathers, uncles and grandfathers, and then, with her brothers and sisters, have all perished away from her, and left her alone in the world with nothing else. She is as convincingly imagined in her relation to them, as the daughter of an old New York family, as she is in her inherited riches. It is not the old New York family of the unfounded Knickerbocker tradition, but something as fully patrician, with a nimbus of social importance as unquestioned as its money. Milly is not so much the flower of this local root as something finer yet: the perfume of it, the distilled and wandering fragrance. It would be hard to say in what her New Yorkishness lies, and Mr. James himself by no means says; only if you know New York at all, you have the unmistakable sense of it. She is New Yorkish in the very essences that are least associable with the superficial notion of New York: the intellectual refinement that comes of being born and bred in conditions of illimitable ease, of having had everything that one could wish to have, and the cultivation that seems to come of the mere ability to command it. If one will have an illustration of the final effect in Milly Theale, it may be that it can be suggested as a sort of a Bostonian quality, with the element of *conscious* worth eliminated, and purified as essentially of pedantry as of commerciality. The wonder is that Mr. James in his prolonged expatriation has been able to seize this lovely impalpability, and to impart the sense of it; and perhaps the true reading of the riddle is that such a nature, such a character is most appreciable in that relief from the background which Europe gives all American character.

### III.

“But that is just what does not happen in the case of Mr. James’s people. They are merged in the background so that you never can get behind them, and fairly feel and see them all round.

Europe *doesn't* detach them; *nothing* does. 'There they are,' as he keeps making his people say in all his late books, when they are not calling one another dear lady, and dear man, and prodigious and magnificent, and of a vagueness or a richness, or a sympathy, or an opacity. No, he is of a tremendousness, but he worries me to death; he kills me; he really gives me a headache. He fascinates me, but I have no patience with him."

"But, dear lady," for it was a weary woman who had interrupted the flow of my censure in these unmeasured terms, and whom her interlocutor—another of Mr. James's insistent words—began trying to flatter to her disadvantage, "a person of your insight must see that this is the conditional vice of all painting, its vital fiction. You cannot get behind the figures in any picture. They are always merged in their background. And there you are!"

"Yes, I know I am. But that is just where I don't want to be. I want figures that I *can* get behind."

"Then you must go to some other shop—you must go to the shop of a sculptor."

"Well, why isn't *he* a sculptor?"

"Because he is a painter."

"Oh, that's no reason. He ought to be a sculptor."

"Then he couldn't give you the color, the light and shade, the delicate *nuances*, the joy of the intimated fact, all that you delight in him for. What was that you were saying the other day? That he was like Monticelli in some of his pastorals or picnics: a turmoil of presences which you could make anything, everything, nothing of as you happened to feel; something going on that you had glimpses of, or were allowed to guess at, but which you were rapturously dissatisfied with, any way."

"Did I say that?" my interlocutress—terrible word!—demanded. "It was very good."

"It was wonderfully good. I should not have named Monticelli, exactly, because though he is of a vagueness that is painty, he is too much of a denseness. Mr. James does not trowel the colors on."

"I see what you mean. Whom should you have named?"

"I don't know. Monticelli will do in one way. He gives you a sense of people, of things undeniably, though not unmistakably, happening, and that is what Mr. James does."

"Yes, he certainly does," and she sighed richly, as if she had been one of his people herself. "He does give you a sense."

"He gives you a sense of a tremendous lot going on, for instance, in *The Wings of a Dove*, of things undeniably, though not unmistakably, happening. It is a great book."

"It is, it is," she sighed again. "It wore me to a thread."

"And the people were as unmistakable as they were undeniable: not Milly, alone, not Mrs. Stringham, as wonderfully of New England as Milly of New York; but all that terribly frank, terribly selfish, terribly shameless, terribly hard English gang."

"Ah, Densher wasn't really hard or really shameless, though he was willing—to please that unspeakable Kate Croy—to make love to Milly and marry her money so that when she died, they could live happy ever after—or at least comfortably. And you cannot say that Kate was frank. And Lord Mark really admired Milly. Or, anyway, he wanted to marry her. Do you think Kate took the money from Densher at last and married Lord Mark?"

"Why should you care?"

"Oh, one oughtn't to care, of course, in reading Mr. James. But with any one else, you would like to know who married who. It is all too wretched. Why should he want to picture such life?"

"Perhaps because it exists."

"Oh, do you think the English are really so bad? I'm glad he made such a beautiful character as Milly, American."

"My notion is that he didn't 'make' any of the characters."

"Of course not. And I suppose some people in England are actually like that. We have not got so far here, yet. To be sure, society is not so all-important here, yet. If it ever is, I suppose we shall pay the price. But *do* you think he ought to picture such life because it exists?"

"Do you find yourself much the worse for *The Wings of a Dove*?" I asked. "Or for *The Sacred Fount*? Or for *The Awkward Age*? Or even for *What Maisie Knew*? They all picture much the same sort of life."

"Why, of course not. But it isn't so much what he says—he never *says* anything—but what he insinuates. I don't believe that is good for young girls."

"But if they don't know what it means? I'll allow that it isn't quite *jeune fille* in its implications, all of them; but maturity has its modest claims. Even its immodest claims are not wholly

ungrounded in the interest of a knowledge of our mother-civilization, which is what Mr. James's insinuations impart, as I understand them."

"Well, young people cannot read him aloud together. You can't deny that."

"No, but elderly people can, and they are not to be ignored by the novelist, always. I fancy the reader who brings some knowledge of good and evil, without being the worse for it, to his work is the sort of reader Mr. James writes for. I can imagine him addressing himself to a circle of such readers as this REVIEW's with a satisfaction, and a sense of liberation, which he might not feel in the following of the family magazines, and still not incriminate himself. I have heard a good deal said in reproach of the sort of life he portrays, in his later books; but I have not found his people of darker deeds or murkier motives than the average in fiction. I don't say, life."

"No, certainly, so far as he tells you. It is what he *doesn't* tell that is so frightful. He leaves you to such awful conjectures. For instance, when Kate Croy—"

"When Kate Croy—?"

"No. I *won't* discuss it. But you know what I mean; and I don't believe there ever was such a girl."

"And you believe there was ever such a girl as Milly Theale?"

"Hundreds! She is true to the life. So perfectly American. My husband and I read the story aloud together, and I wanted to weep. We had such a strange experience with that book. We read it half through together; then we got impatient, and tried to finish it alone. But we could not make anything of it apart; and we had to finish it together. We could not bear to lose a word; every word—and there were a good many!—seemed to tell. If you took one away you seemed to miss something important. It almost destroyed me, thinking it all out. I went round days, with my hand to my forehead; and I don't believe I understand it perfectly yet. Do you?"

#### IV.

I pretended that I did, but I do not mind being honester with the reader than I was with my interlocutress. I have a theory that it is not well to penetrate every recess of an author's meaning. It robs him of the charm of mystery, and the somewhat



labyrinthine construction of Mr. James's later sentences lends itself to the practice of the self-denial necessary to the preservation of this charm. What I feel sure of is that he has a meaning in it all, and that by and by, perhaps when I least expect it, I shall surprise his meaning. In the meanwhile I rest content with what I do know. In spite of all the Browning Clubs—even the club which has put up a monument to the poet's butler-ancestor—all of Browning is not clear, but enough of Browning is clear for any real lover of his poetry.

I was sorry I had not thought of this in time to say it to my interlocutress; and I was sorry I had not amplified what I did say of his giving you a sense of things, so as to make it apply to places as well as persons. Never, in my ignorance, have I had a vividder sense of London, in my knowledge a stronger sense of Venice, than in *The Wings of a Dove*. More miraculous still, as I have tried to express, was the sense he gave me of the anterior New York where the life flowered which breathed out the odor called Milly Theale—a heartbreaking fragrance as of funeral violets—and of the anterior New England sub-acidly fruiting in Mrs. Stringham. As for social conditions, predicaments, orders of things, where shall we find the like of the wonders wrought in *The Awkward Age*? I have been trying to get phrases which should convey the effect of that psychomancy from me to my reader, and I find none so apt as some phrase that should suggest the convincingly incredible. Here is something that the reason can as little refuse as it can accept. Into quite such particles as the various characters of this story would the disintegration of the old, rich, demoralized society of an ancient capital fall so probably that each of the kaleidoscopic fragments, dropping into irrelevant radiance around Mrs. Brookenham, would have its fatally appointed tone in the "scheme of color." Here is that inevitable, which Mr. Brander Matthews has noted as the right and infallible token of the real. It does not matter, after that, how the people talk,—or in what labyrinthine parentheses they let their unarriving language wander. They strongly and vividly exist, and they construct not a drama, perhaps, but a world, floating indeed in an obscure where it seems to have its solitary orbit, but to be as solidly palpable as any of the planets of the more familiar systems, and wrapt in the aura of its peculiar corruption. How bad the bad people on it may be, one does not

know, and is not intended to know, perhaps; that would be like being told the gross facts of some scandal which, so long as it was untouched, supported itself not unamusingly in air; but of the goodness of the good people one is not left in doubt; and it is a goodness which consoles and sustains the virtue apt to droop in the presence of neighborly remissness.

I might easily attribute to the goodness a higher office than this; but if I did I might be trenching upon that ethical delicacy of the author which seems to claim so little for itself. Mr. James is, above any other, the master of the difficult art of never doing more than to "hint a fault, or hesitate dislike," and I am not going to try committing him to conclusions he would shrink from. There is nothing of the clumsiness of the "satirist" in his design, and if he notes the absolute commerciality of the modern London world, it is with a reserve clothing itself in frankness which is infinitely, as he would say, "detached." But somehow, he lets you know how horribly *business* fashionable English life is; he lets Lord Mark let Milly Theale know, at their first meeting, when he tells her she is with people who never do anything for nothing, and when, with all her money, and perhaps because of it, she is still so trammelled in the ideal that she cannot take his meaning. Money, and money bluntly; gate-money of all kinds; money the means, is the tune to which that old world turns in a way which we scarcely imagine in this crude new world where it is still so largely less the means than the end.

But the general is lost in the personal, as it should be in Mr. James's books, earlier as well as later, and the allegory is so faint that it cannot always be traced. He does not say that the limitless liberty allowed Nanda Brookenham by her mother in *The Awkward Age* is better than the silken bondage in which the Duchess keeps her niece Aggie, though Nanda is admirably lovable, and little Aggie is a little cat; that is no more his affair than to insist upon the loyalty of old Mr. Longdon to an early love, or the generosity of Mitchett, as contrasted with the rapacity of Mrs. Brookenham, who, after all, wants nothing more than the means of being what she has always been. What he does is simply to show you those people mainly on the outside, as you mainly see people in the world, and to let you divine them and their ends from what they do and say. They are presented with in-

finite pains; as far as their appearance (though they are very little described) goes, you are not suffered to make a mistake. But he does not analyze them for you; rather he synthetizes them, and carefully hands them over to you in a sort of integrity very uncommon in the characters of fiction. One might infer from this that his method was dramatic, something like Tourguénieff's, say; but I do not know that his method is dramatic. I do not recall from the book more than one passage of dramatic intensity, but that was for me of very great intensity; I mean the passage where old Mr. Longdon lets Vanderbank understand that he will provide for him if he will offer himself to Nanda, whom he knows to be in love with Vanderbank, and where Vanderbank will not promise. That is a great moment, where everything is most openly said, most brutally said, to American thinking; and yet said with a restraint of feeling that somehow redeems it all.

Nothing could well be more perfected than the method of the three books which I have been supposing myself to be talking about, however far any one may think it from perfect. They express mastery, finality, doing what one means, in a measure not easily to be matched. I will leave out of the question the question of obscurity; I will let those debate that whom it interests more than it interests me. For my own part I take it that a master of Mr. James's quality does not set out with a design whose significance is not clear to himself, and if others do not make it clear to themselves, I suspect them rather than him of the fault. All the same I allow that it is sometimes not easy to make out; I allow that sometimes *I* do not make it out, I, who delight to read him almost more than any other living author, but then I leave myself in his hands. I do not believe he is going finally to play me the shabby trick of abandoning me in the dark; and meanwhile he perpetually interests me. If anything, he interests me too much, and I come away fatigued, because I cannot bear to lose the least pulse of the play of character; whereas from most fiction I lapse into long delicious absences of mind, now and then comfortably recovering myself to find out what is going on, and then sinking below the surface again.

*The Awkward Age* is mostly expressed in dialogue; *The Wings of a Dove* is mostly in the narration and the synthesis of emotions. Not the synthesis of the motives, please; these in both books are left to the reader, almost as much as they are in *The Sacred*

*Fount.* That troubled source, I will own, "is of a profundity," and in its depths darkles the solution which the author makes it no part of his business to pull to the top; if the reader wants it, let him dive. But why should not a novel be written so like to life, in which most of the events remain the meaningless, that we shall never quite know what the author meant? Why, in fact, should not people come and go, and love and hate, and hurt and help one another as they do in reality, without rendering the reader a reason for their behavior, or offering an explanation at the end with which he can light himself back over the way he has come, and see what they meant? Who knows what any one means here below, or what he means himself, that is, precisely stands for? Most people mean nothing, except from moment to moment, if they indeed mean anything so long as that, and life which is full of propensities is almost without motives. In the scribbles which we suppose to be imitations of life, we hold the unhappy author to a logical consistency which we find so rarely in the original; but ought not we rather to praise him where his work confesses itself, as life confesses itself, without a plan? Why should we demand more of the imitator than we get from the creator?

Of course, it can be answered that we are *in* creation like characters in fiction, while we are outside of the imitation and spectators instead of characters; but that does not wholly cover the point. Perhaps, however, I am asking more for Mr. James than he would have me. In that case I am willing to offer him the reparation of a little detraction. I wish he would leave his people more, not less, to me when I read him. I have tried following their speeches without taking in his comment, delightfully pictorial as that always is, and it seems to me that I make rather more of their meaning, that way. I reserve the pleasure and privilege of going back and reading his comment in the light of my conclusions. This is the method I have largely pursued with the people of *The Sacred Fount*, of which I do not hesitate to say that I have mastered the secret, though, for the present I am not going to divulge it. Those who cannot wait may try the key which I have given.

But do not, I should urge them, expect too much of it; I do not promise it will unlock everything. If you find yourself, at the end, with nothing in your hand but the postulate with which

the supposed narrator fantastically started, namely, that people may involuntarily and unconsciously prey upon one another, and mentally and psychically enrich themselves at one another's expense, still you may console yourself, if you do not think this enough, with the fact that you have passed the time in the company of men and women freshly and truly seen, amusingly shown, and abidingly left with your imagination. For me, I am so little exacting, that this is enough.

*The Sacred Fount* is a most interesting book, and you are teased through it to the end with delightful skill, but I am not going to say that it is a great book like *The Awkward Age*, or *The Wings of a Dove*. These are really incomparable books, not so much because there is nothing in contemporary fiction to equal them as because there is nothing the least like them. They are of a kind that none but their author can do, and since he is alone master of their art, I am very well content to leave him to do that kind of book quite as he chooses. I will not so abandon my function as to say that I could not tell him how to do them better, but it sufficiently interests me to see how he gets on without my help. After all, the critic has to leave authors somewhat to themselves; he cannot always be writing their books for them; and when I find an author, like Mr. James, who makes me acquainted with people who instantly pique my curiosity by "something rich and strange," in an environment which is admirably imaginable, I gratefully make myself at home with them, and stay as long as he will let me.

## V.

"But,"—here is that interlocutress whom I flattered myself I had silenced, at me again,—“do you like to keep puzzling things out, so? I don't. Of course, the books *are* intensely fascinating, but I do not like to keep guessing conundrums. Why shouldn't we have studies of life that are not a series of conundrums?”

"Dear lady," I make my answer, "what was I saying just now but that life itself is a series of conundrums, to which the answers are lost in the past, or are to be supplied us, after a long and purifying discipline of guessing, in the future? I do not admit your position, but if I did, still I should read the author who keeps you guessing, with a pleasure, an edification, in the suggestive, the instructive way he has of asking his conundrums beyond that I take in any of the authors who do not tax my

curiosity, who shove their answers at me before I have had a chance to try whether I cannot guess them. Here you have the work of a great psychologist, who has the imagination of a poet, the wit of a keen humorist, the conscience of an impeccable moralist, the temperament of a philosopher, and the wisdom of a rarely experienced witness of the world; and yet you come back at me with the fact, or rather the pretence, that you do not like to keep puzzling his things out. It is my high opinion of you that you precisely do like to keep puzzling his things out; that you are pleased with the sort of personal appeal made to you by the difficulties you pretend to resent, and that you enjoy the just sense of superiority which your continual or final divinations give you. Mr. James is one of those authors who pay the finest tribute an author can pay the intelligence of his reader by trusting it, fully and frankly. There you are; and if you were not puzzling out those recondite conundrums which you complain of, what better things, in the perusal of the whole range of contemporary fiction, could you be doing? For my part I can think for you of none. There is no book like *The Awkward Age*, as I said, for it is sole of its kind, and no book that at all equals it, since Mr. Hardy's *Jude*, for the intensity of its naturalness. I don't name them to compare them; again I renounce all comparisons for Mr. James's work; but I will say that in the deeply penetrating anguish of *Jude*, I felt nothing profounder than the pathos which aches and pierces through those closing scenes of *The Awkward Age*, in Nanda's last talk with Vanderbank, whom she must and does leave for her mother's amusement, and her yet later talk with old Mr. Longdon, to whom she must and does own her love for Vanderbank so heartbreaking. What beautiful and gentle souls the new-fashioned young girl and the old-fashioned old man are, and how beautifully and gently they are revealed to us by the perfected art of the book in which they continue to live after we part with them! How—"

"Ah, there," my interlocutress broke in, as if fearful of not having the last word, "I certainly agree with you. I wish you were as candid about everything else."

W. D. HOWELLS.